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By

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## NATURAL RELIGION.

"One God and Father of all, who is over all and through and in all."  
—Eph. iv. 6.

These words of the apostle will give me at the outset a three-fold thought from which to take account of Natural Religion. But before I end the sermon I shall come to another three-fold report of this Religion by an elder prophet.

Natural Religion is that which dwells in all houses of faith, in all companies or temples or adorations of whatever name, or whether there be no name at all. And he who dwells with Natural Religion must be ready to be at home anywhere and find nature's face in every habitation. For myself, I hope I am so; and I hope it is for my soul's good health that I should be, howsoever with mortal weakness and littleness of mind I may fall short of it. If I were brought into being in mid space, on no earth, with no history, naught in my soul of men's device or statement, but only the thought of God, and then were dropped on this earth in this maze of histories, creeds, religions, forms, worships, I know not how I could feel more at home with all, less averse to any, than now I do, if they be sincere. I have no name which labels or prescribes me. There are few assemblies or thoughts so little human but I can pick out some greatness to feed on and some habitude which is fellow to mine; and none so grand in humanity (which is in divinity too) but I can aspire and strive up unto it with understanding and joy.

Therefore habit me in any name you will, I know none but fits some bend in me. Will you call me Jew? I will accept it. To me Moses is colossal. I glory in the prophets. I am under amazement with all that history. I am astonished with the sufferings, fortitude, devotion, sincerity, sublimity, religion of the race. I sing the psalms. Nor is there any anthem or cry of religion in the ages that moves me so like the sound of an



archangel's trumpet as the Hebrew watch-cry, "Hear, O Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal is One." Will you call me Christian? I shall not deny it. I was born in that household. It were strange if in the house of my heritage I could find no pictures and nothing fine. I am astonished and glorified in Jesus. I have joy in the wonderful parables of him, and in the mountain sermon, and in his love of the fields and flowers and gentle creatures, in his defiance and courage, in his appeal to his own soul, in his dealing with children, with the women who revered him, with the outcast, the despised, the sinful, with the great and with the lowly, and before Pilate and on the cross. Paul is an amazing fiery greatness to me. All the gospel and Paul's letters are very great. The rush of a pure charity and of enthusiasm of humanity into the Roman world with the first Christians, the rise of hospitals and brotherhoods of mercy and angelic sisters, many great saints and martyrs and brave protesters, all these magnify the Lord. I am of them and established by them; I am fed with the glory of them; I will not leave them. I like the name of them, be it Christian. Or will you call me Unitarian? It is welcome. The name is honorable. It has a brave history, and therefore is honorable in itself. It is unpopular, and even much hated by those who know not what it means, and therefore raises the more honor in bearing it. I have joy in its unity of worship; I find reason and fervor in its looking unto ONE the ETERNAL ONE, neither two nor three, but ONE alone. I am rejoiced by its love of human nature and declaration of the dignity and worth of every soul, and the preciousness of every one soul, equal to any other. I am blessed with its wide fellowship, founded in the spirit and not in the letter, in the heart and not in creed, whereby it welcomes all, and excludes not any, and examines no one's creed who assumes the name, but leaves to each soul to say what name best suits it. For thus I see and conclude of Unitarianism, namely, that if a line be drawn around all things which call themselves by that name, at least in this country of ours, that line will include more differences of opinion, and more extreme differences, living together in love and peace, seeking truth thoughtfully, speaking thought truthfully and crowning every one with a like freedom of the spirit, than any other line that

can be circumscribed. And this is very noble and cheering, truth revealing. I am at home in it. I am happy in it. It fills me like mountain air. It tastes good like hill water. I like the name of it, be it Unitarian. Or will you call me by no name, and say I own none, because he who is anything is nothing? I shall not quarrel with you; neither feel I at all cold if I be stripped in that manner. For the best name is but a little thing when a man has fenced it, and all of them together are not worth a contention. You will call me Naturalist, or Rationalist, or Theist? Do so. I like them. They fit me. I would I might be worthy to bear them, for I have found persons called by those names full of sweetness and purity; and certainly they describe well what thoughts I have and what *credo* I love, for I have naught to preach and no hold sufficient for my spirit but simple Natural Religion.

To speak now of Natural Religion, I find in it:

1. The Substance.
2. The Forms.
3. The Records.
4. Human Relations in Religion.

Of these I will speak in order.

First, of the substance of Natural Religion. Now, here I might stop and go no further than this one point. It were not only enough for a sermon but for a whole large discourse, or even whole book, to convey the substance of Natural Religion; for though the grand thoughts of it are few, yes, and simple, yet they are so very grand—such as God, Providence, Love, Trust, Duty, Faith, Peace, Life—that to treat of them is to unlock and open the whole soul. But it is not my purpose in this sermon to explore Natural Religion in such a way, but only to give account of some great features of it, an outline, of which some words about the substance of it must be part.

Now, the substance of Natural Religion is much and rich, thoughts very great and very rich, as I have said. But these thoughts will be greater and richer in some places and some minds than in others; for they will be conceived in their riches and greatness better in higher and more developed natures than in minds more ignorant and less unfolded. But because these higher natures and more unfolded minds have these great



thoughts more richly, and enter into them more, shall we say that the poorer or less unfolded forms of them in less taught or less grown minds, are not religion? By no means. Religion is like pure air. On the finest hill in the wholesomest plain it is no more than air. So religion is not transcended, nor comes to more than its own, in the highest beauty or conception of a saint and seer, and is not extinguished nor despoiled of itself in lowly and poor forms and made rude thoughts of it. Therefore I may take now, in speaking of the substance of it, the least and most unexpanded form that seems to have the countenance or name of Religion. This is, the Adoration of the Good, the Beautiful and the True. Wherever this veneration appears, religion has been born. It has then but to grow and unfold in order to come to all its members, to all its divisions and beauties and powers. But you will say, "Is not Morality also just this same thing, namely, reverence for the good, the beautiful and the true? Yes. "Then how differ Religion and Morality?" Now, this question I have spoken of in two sermons of this volume,\* wherefore I ought not to repeat it here, further than to say again, in sum, that religion is adoration of Holiness, Beauty and Truth as now radiant in Being, but morality is adoration of them as to be grown unto and attained in us.

To the Holy, Beautiful and True Being, we give the "Great Name." He is God. He "is above all," as Paul's text says. The name is not made by us, as if men said long ago, "Go to now! let us have a name for the Holiness and Beauty of Being." No; but the name springs in men very early, very far back in the prime shadows of time, with the notions of conception, of angels, of dreams in them, with their first up-look above themselves to Power more great and awful and adorable. The Great Name thus arises, and utters man's sense of the Being who is "above all," rules, carries, guides, orders and makes all. Then, slowly, but surely and never failing, by the growth and progress of the spiritual nature, beginning with the first beliefs of what is good, what is beautiful and true, according to their imperfect vision, the Supreme, the Power "above all," is clothed unto men with Mercy, with Providence, with Salvation and Loving-kindness, and men are clothed with the estate of children unto

\*"What is Religion?" p. 1; "Religion and Ethics," p. 11.

him. Then awakes the name "Our Father," and the first substance of Natural Religion hath come to its height and fervor and joy.

So far what I have said has unfolded only from the first of the three parts of Paul's grand words in my text. He says of God that "He is above all, and through all, and in all." I have been speaking only those thoughts which do utter Him as "above all." But now I have to say that Natural Religion thinks of the Father also as "through all"—not a maker, a creator, a planner, a framer, as one may imagine a man sending by his power some message or object to his friend, which will gladden the heart of his friend though he be away and far off. Not so, not a maker and framer; but the One whose *being* is the making of all things, who hath not made the things but now is the things by his own presence and life,—as if the man whom I spoke of should not send by his power any *object* to his friend, but *himself*, and be to his friend by his presence and in himself the gift, the object, the life, the power, and the help, all in one, thus not *conveying* a joy, but himself *being* it, and, if so I may say, by his own living it into his friend. Thus the Father is not far off nor a maker to send anything from a distance away, but the One whose infinite life is itself all things that we have, who, being above all so that all things come of him, so likewise through all, so that naught comes of him to go from him and be without him, but he is unto us those things that in him live and move and have being. Wherefore all men and all the dumb creatures who are our fellow beings, and whatsoever beings may exist anywhere, whom we know not and yet sometime may know, all these, yes, and all the waving trees and little wood flowers and humble plants, through which (so some botanists now tell us) runs very likely some sense of well being which we, with our glorious faculties, have lost count of and can imagine no more—all these, I say, are his children, and gathered into one undivided thought in him; and he is "through all." O what a thought of the great apostle is this, that he is "through all!" It were easy to say "*above all*," and this have the ages said forever and ever, from the first speech of man; but to say that he is "through all," this is a great flight of piety which had to wait till the bars and lattices of fear were eaten away by the



elements, and freed the wings of the soul to roam and be at home anywhere; nor afraid of anything, however seeming to dissolve beneath it, because it had wings. O what a thought, I say, of the great apostle! And yet rather would I call it a thought of man, of all men, of the soul itself; yea, and not a thought, as one may wrestle and can understand in mind, like as the body may struggle and get its aim by strength—no not a thought thus, but rather the life, the nature, and being of the soul, its very breath and motion, like unto the breathing of the body which is strength, but not struggle. Therefore, O what the life of man is! I will say what the soul! what the height and depth and the light and the love of natural piety,—that it is this utterance of Him, the Father who is “through all;” not far away, nay, and not near either, for to be near is to be too far, but “through all,” and therefore all in Him.

So much being said, in exceeding brevity, of the substance of Natural Religion, we come to religious forms. What has simple Natural Religion to say of all the many forms of religion?

This, first—that there is only one religion. Natural Religion signifies the one universal religion, and is ready to say that all religion is one, and there is but this one religion in the world, nor can be any other. For religion is worship and uplifting of the soul truly to the One True, Beautiful, Holy Being whose name is God and Father. And as he is One, and religion is a going forth unto Him, how can there be more than one religion? If a saint pray, and a savage bow himself before a carved image or a block of wood or a stone, both worship God, for an act of worship can go no elsewhither than unto God, the One.

But though there be only one religion in the world, and can be no more, there are many forms of religion. The one religion appears in many forms. These differing forms bring many things to be joined with religion which are external and belong not to the real nature and true essence of religion; which fact the Natural Religion itself perceives already, and knows itself, and is one and the same thing clothed with one array of form in one place and with another in another place and a third in some other place. Now these many differing forms, wherein outward things are joined with the one pure religion, are called Historical Religions; though it were better to call them Histori-



cal Forms of Religion. All these Historical Religions have truth in them; for all of them share in the one universal Natural Religion, and in that part they are true and everlasting. But all these Historical Religions contain error also, for all are dipped in the ideas of particular nations, races, times; and in that part they are imperfect or erroneous, and transitory.

The chief Historical Religions, or Forms of Religion are six in number: Judaism, Parseeism, China's Religion, Buddhism, Islamism, Christianity. In all of these the substance of religion is the same and is simple Natural Religion. It is more clear in one than in another, more refined, spiritual, fervent, more spoken forth in power and in purity; but it is not alien from any. It is the one substance in them all which makes each of them to be religion. Now therewith the variations which cause them to be Historical Religions, are many, and differ widely in them:

Buddhism is the Historical Religion which was raised in India by the life and teachings of the prophet Gotama. It is marked by sayings of wisdom and piety ascribed to that prophet, and also by traditions of mighty wonders and miracles mingled with his life.

Parseeism is the Historical Religion which was begun in Persia under the inspiration of the teachings of Zarathustra, called by the Greeks Zoroaster, no doubt a great prophet; and the religion has sayings and prayers and great wisdom and fervor ascribed to him, and also a very great array of wonders, miracles and signs done by him and around him.

Judaism is the Historical Religion of the Jews, founded on the Hebrew prophets, chiefly Moses; and it is full of sublime and beautiful wisdom, fervor, ethical truth, in the sayings of the prophets; and full also of its own wonders and miracles wrought around Moses and other great leaders and prophets of the people.

Islamism is the Historical Religion which arose in Arabia by the deeds and teachings of Mahomet. It has great and fervent proclamations and prayers in it, ascribed to Mahomet, and it, like the others, has its miracles gathered about the prophet's life, though few, and less miraculous than the wonderful traditions of the other Historical Religions already mentioned.

The Religion of China, or Confucianism, was builded in China by the teaching and life of Kung-fu-tee, called by us Confucius; it is full of calm and high and gentle wisdom ascribed to that teacher, but it is strangely free from the stories of miracles and signs which throng in all the others of the six chief Historical Religions.

Christianity is the Historical Religion which began in Palestine in the life and teachings of the prophet Jesus of Nazareth. It is full of very beautiful teachings ascribed to him, very pure and high and spiritual; and it has a great tradition of miracles and signs wrought by him or around him to establish his mission and authority.

Christianity is simply a Historical Religion. It is one of the great and chief six, no more, no less. It is not the one true and perfect religion, as its believers say it is. All the believers of each one of the Historical Religions say the same thing of their religion. They say it is the one religion which is true and everlasting. But no one of these religions is so. Every one of them partakes of Natural Religion, and in that part it is at one with all the others, and is truth and everlastingness. But every one of them also has its own special doctrines, claims, ceremonies, rites, and all but one have arrays of miracles which each one claims to be the divine proof of the supremacy and perfectness of it; and in this part they are merely historical, not spiritual, merely so many events in some time and some place and not the natural substance of the soul's worship always and everywhere; and therefore in this part they are temporal and transitory. And this is true of all of them, and of Christianity as surely as of any of them. After reading much in them all and with admiration of every one of them, I think indeed that Christianity is larger, more chaste, more serene, more fervent, with more power in it of unfolding and growing toward perfectness, and with local, temporary, transitory elements less intimately and structurally mingled with the Natural Religion in it, than any other Historical Religion. But if it be so, there is naught marvelous or strange therein. If some one of the Historical Religions had not attained to a broader vision than the others, this were the strange thing. But I say this of Christianity very modestly, with no bold self-confidence, with remembrance that

the believer born into any other of the Historical Religions conceives likewise of his own religion, with a sense specially of the fecund and unfolding power which Judaism is displaying, and finally with a pure historical indifference whether it be Christianity or any other of them which is the higher and nobler, for I am simply glad in the human nobleness and go to it with love and stretch my hands to it, whatever be the name of it.

Here again in these many forms of religion, we come to the apostle's grand words that the "Father is above all and through all." "*Above all*" he is, for he is the One, the Infinite, the Eternal, the Life and Love and Presence whom all the forms reach and struggle unto, and sing and praise and pray. And he is "through all" the forms, because men as little can pray and think, or dream or praise or glorify apart from him and of themselves, as they can walk or be born or live or die of themselves; but he is through all, through all the forms, and through all the religions that are named and are but forms added unto the one only religion; through all these he is the same Providence, the same Reason, the same Life and Love, bringing them all to pass, all to grow till they change as seeds into shoots, and shoots to stems, and stems to trees, till they lift mighty heads into the skies. Through all he is, and lives in that manner which we call truth; for whatever is is so in him, and to see anything as it is is to behold his nature and to see him; and in all the many forms and names is truth, and no one of them is all false and all a failure, but every one of them is true in part and in part yet striving for truth. like a tree which hath formed many rings of sound wood and hath told in them the truth of its age, and yet makes a new ring every golden season, and predicts not the sum of its years, as it cannot do because it cannot know the Father in his infinity; but it hath told the truth of its past, because it knows the Father not falsely but truly, though only in part. Thus he is through all in the truth of all, and truth is one, and all the many forms of the one religion are gathered in him into one thought, as all the many worlds are in one law and in one space; and he is through them all in that truth of them all which is the one pure, upstriving, humble piety and worship of the human soul; which is the same as the child-instinct in it, never ceasing to cling to the Father, and to



cry aloud with prayer for him when in need, and with songs unto him in joy.

So far I have spoken of the substance of Natural Religion, and of the historical forms of it. The substance is one and universal, being love and worship unto the One Supreme, True, Beautiful and Holy Being whose name is God, in whom all men, and all the dumb animals who are our fellow beings, and whatsoever creatures may exist anywhere, "live and move and have their being." The historical forms of this one religion, which is to say, the one substance joined with divers local and temporary things, are many, and are known as Historical Religions. Now I come to the third point in the history of Natural Religion, namely, that all these Historical Religions make for themselves Records. In these Records are written down the lives of the great founder, teachers, prophets, singers of the faith, with their teachings and psalms and prayers, and with the miracles, "wonders and signs" and "mighty works" told of them. For the stories of miracles and signs always grow up and are received simply and fondly, when men are full of reverence and not yet have learned the laws, actions and properties of natural objects.

These Records which the Historical Religions thus make for themselves are called Scriptures. The books of them are holy and sacred, and to believe them reverently always is a part of the religion. The Bible is the Scripture of the Jews and the Christians. The Old Bible is the Scripture of the Jews. The New Testament is a collection of the writings of the first Christians; and all the books of the Bible, both of the Old Testament and of the New, are the Christian Scriptures.

Now in what manner ought we to read this Scripture, the Bible? In three ways, namely, with reverence, with care, and with reason: reverently, because it holds great, beautiful and devout thoughts, the teachings, psalms and prayers of holy men and prophets; carefully, in order to understand it aright, for which indeed much care, knowledge, judgment, comparison and study are needful; rationally, because reason is the light of the mind whereby to try all things and judge what is true.

Here come we to the third thought in Paul's grand text, not only that God is "above all" and "through all," but "in all,"

and in us all—the light of reason. Reasoning is the mind's eye, and the sight of the truth therewith. There are things which reasoning cannot compass. And there are distances which the eye cannot resolve, but it can save us from pits at hand. Likewise reason, though it reveal not all nor resolve all distances of truth while yet we are far off from them, nor can show us yet all that infinitely is reasonable, yet it can save us from pits of the unreasonable. And as the light of the sun, which is God's shining, fills the eye of the body, so doth his indwelling Presence, his life in whom we live, his spiritual enlightenment, fill and open the reason, the eye of the soul. How strangely have men denied the reason! How sottishly have they thrown it away! How impiously have they scorned it! It is "at enmity with God," it is but a "carnal reason," it is blind and deceitful, mischievous, it leads away from God, it must be put away and simple belief or faith must be followed, or perhaps a church or a book, nay, the reason is so "carnal" and so unfaithful to us and unreligious that it is well to confound it as much as possible, and he has the most excellent faith who declares the most unreasonable things, like the Schoolman who said "I believe this doctrine because it is incredible, I accept it because it is impossible"—these, and many such things, have men said about human reason; not perceiving that it is divine reason, the divine within us, God communing with us, his light enlightening us, and "in us all," and if we deny the reason, we have hooded our eyes from knowledge of God and have turned us from his appearing unto us. In all the sallies of the reason from the ports of sense, God dwells in us and goes with us. He is "in us all." Not any son of man anywhere hath he inspired more truly nor dwelt in him bodily in fulness more absolutely than he is "in us all" and maketh the reason light and giveth vision. Wherefore we are to treat our reason holily and reverently, and though it resolve not all things and all distances, yet, while we await more, we are to walk with it reverently now, and know it is the action of the whole soul toward God, and it is the eye which he hath made or given us in his own likeness, and the sight of it is by him and with him and his indwelling, "by whose light we see light." So saith simple Natural Religion. Let the reason be used and followed, in things human and divine, patiently, with piety, with

trust to wait and, when we see clearly, then to speak or to do, unfearing, with a lowly bravery, for God is "in us all."

Now, finally, I come to human relations in Natural Religion. What must these be? In what way, by the spirit of simple Natural Religion, shall we encompass each other and live one with another? This is a great thing. For it were strange if Natural Religion, which turns us, by first light, unto God, had naught to do in turning us one to another; strange if, going unto the Father, there were no bonds therein between the children going together. Now it is a curious thing in the Historical Religions, or at least a very notable thing, and I cannot but think it also strange to the simplicity of reason, that men have paid much more reverence and devotion to the historical parts of religion, the local events, traditions, and the color which has been taken from one race and one time,—to this, I say, men have done much more reverence than to the one simple and pure substance of religion itself. It is the historical parts that they have clung about with intensity. Now, as it is in the historical forms that men differ, being at one in their simple Natural Religion, their great homage to the historical parts, has nursed the differences of men and set their minds on their alienations rather than on their unities. Hence have arisen wars, hatreds, persecutions, the bitterness of sects. The Historical Religions have taken but small account, on the whole, of the human relations, so small indeed, that it has been accounted a piety in one religion to hate men of another faith. But in simple Natural Religion all are as one, and this pure faith is very kind, and hath as much to say of the fellowship of the children in the Father as of the adoration of the Father. Therefore human relations are very sacred points in Natural Religion; but the principles are very simple withal, and to be stated in a few words, though large works were needed to open and apply them to all human conditions and companying.

These simple principles are expressed thus,—that the most sacred things in human relations are Love and Duty. But Love—what is that? It is a deep and kind feeling of fraternity and fellowship with all creatures, as one family in the Fatherhood of God. And Duty—what is that? The sum of Duty is to confess every creature and thing to be what it is, and to be-



have toward it according to its nature. The sense of Duty lives in the word OUGHT, which we speak and understand because we are children of the Eternal and Holy, who is God.

We live, therefore, in this one bond, of three parts,—unto our Father in Worship, unto all creatures in Love and in Duty. This is the sum of the whole matter. “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

Here now I have set forth, as best I could, the simple doctrine of Natural Religion. Paul has uttered it in a three-fold way in the grand words of my text, that it is the thought of God, of the Father, above all and through all and in us all. Likewise, as I have followed the path of the expounding of it as best I could, I have found it a wide road of three separate foot-ways, though different from the three-foldness which the apostle has given it. The apostle’s three-foldness clashes not at all with this other which I have found; and like enough, if I were to study farther and more curiously, I might find other three-fold divisions; for it is to be noted how often thoughts and things do run in threes. The three foot-ways or paths of the highway of Natural Religion, as I have been walking in them in this discourse, are these: that we live unto the Father in religious worship, which is to say in that devout feeling which binds us back unto our source, and adores therein the infinitely Holy, Beautiful and True. And again, that we live unto all creatures in love, for that we must hold all in our hearts who also are in the heart of the one Father of all; and again that we live unto all creatures in duty, which is to say that we must strive to see them as they are in truth, and to act toward them according to that truth. Here then are the three paths of the highway,—the looking of the soul unto the Infinite who is our Father, and love and duty to all creatures who are our fellow-children. Now as Paul set forth one three-foldness in his grand words, so has an elder prophet, Micah, long before the great apostle, set forward this other three-pathed roadway of the natural religion of man in that noble saying of his which I have repeated just now, “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

This I have called Natural Religion; and how better could it

be named? For if it be religion to love the Good, the Beautiful and the True, and love nothing better, nor so well, and to lift the heart devoutly to these wherever they shine, then truly this is religion. And if it be religion to be moved with the thought that the Holy, the Beautiful, the True is infinitely and supremely living, now and in the beginning and ever to be, One and Eternal, without shadow of turning or change, and now pressing on the eyes and ears and touch and thought and love and hope with instant and infinite glory, in whom we and all things have being—then surely this is religion. And if what springs in the heart everywhere be natural, then this is *Natural Religion*. If what knows no bounds of time or space, but in every age has shone out, and in every place has builded temples, be natural,—then this is *Natural Religion*. If what can be confined to no earth but must be the same everywhere for thinking, feeling and praying creatures, be natural—then this is *Natural Religion*. And if that which is all-sufficient, which comprises all the glory of thinking and all the devoutness of worship, and all the fixedness of hope, and all the winged speed of faith, in one thought and rapture, be natural,—then this is *Natural Religion*. And if whatever stands steadfast in life and steadfast in death be natural,—to walk by on earth and to walk by off the earth, whither we know not, only that we go by and with this,—then this is *Natural Religion*. It is sufficient, the thought of the One who is God, the Father, “above all and through all and in all.”